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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSJ #0812/01 2671802  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 241802Z SEP 09  
FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1236  
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 4546  
RUEABND/DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMIN HQ WASHINGTON DC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC  
RHMFIUU/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL

UNCLAS SAN JOSE 000812

SIPDIS  
SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [PREF](#) [CO](#) [CS](#)  
SUBJECT: COSTA RICA'S CLOSE RELATIONS WITH COLOMBIA

REF: A. 08 SANJOSE 263  
    **1**B. 07 SANJOSE 069  
    **1**C. SANJOSE 478  
    **1**D. SANJOSE 532

**11.** (SBU) Summary: Costa Rica has an expanding political and economic relationship with Colombia, which it currently sees as its second closest partner in Latin America, behind Panama. Politically, Presidents Arias and Uribe share a warm relationship, and the two countries coordinate closely on law enforcement issues. Economically, bilateral trade has increased nearly 350 percent over the past ten years, though the trade gap is clearly in Colombia's favor. However average Costa Ricans often express dislike of Colombians, primarily due to an increase in crime and drug use (both seen to be related to Colombian narco-trafficking) in recent years. And while Uribe and Arias have discussed the need for a "united front" between themselves and Panama against Hugo Chavez and his followers, for now the GOCR is hesitant to formalize a more-robust partnership with Colombia. Yet as Costa Rica seeks friends with compatible points of view, continued close ties between the two countries can be expected. End Summary.

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A POLITICAL PARTNERSHIP  
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**12.** (SBU) Costa Rican-Colombian bilateral relations have traditionally been strong, and close ties between the two countries have persisted through various Costa Rican administrations, largely due to common interests. While the GOCR and the GOC do not agree on all points, both governments have positioned themselves in opposition to the rise of populists/Chavistas in Central and South America. Colombian Ambassador to Costa Rica Luis Fernandez recently told us that Arias and Uribe, while attending El Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes' June 1 inauguration, spoke of the "need for a united front among Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia against the socialists." Another source, who was present at Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli's swearing in ceremony, said that Martinelli told Arias and Uribe of the need for a "C-P-C block against the Chavistas" at the inauguration.

**13.** (SBU) On the other hand, the GOCR has some concerns over the possibility of an even closer relationship with Colombia. Alejandro Solano, Director of Foreign Policy for Costa Rica's MFA, told us that they will sign an agreement with Panama in October which will, among other things, permit border crossings between the two countries with only a national identification card (instead of a passport).

However, due to concerns about Colombia's security situation and the possibility for transit of narcotraffickers, the GOCR was not prepared to formalize a similar relationship with Colombia at this time. Solano said that after concluding their wider agreement with Panama, they will begin to look at areas where Costa Rica and Colombia could formalize tighter relations in specific sectors, excluding border security and immigration issues.

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SECURITY AND DISASTER ASSISTANCE  
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**14.** (U) Costa Rica's deteriorating domestic security situation is clearly linked with the relatively recent rise in narco-trafficking related crime. FARC or narco-related Colombians have often sought refuge in Costa Rica, which has generally had a soft-on-crime reputation in practice and deed. Recently, the GOCR has sought to bolster its law enforcement capabilities, including strengthening its law enforcement relationship with Colombia.

**15.** (SBU) Costa Rica has worked with the Colombian government to find, prosecute or deport criminals wanted by the Colombian government (Ref B). One particularly high-profile case came in March 2008, when Costa Rican authorities, using Colombian information obtained during a GOC raid on FARC commander Raul Reyes' camp, confiscated \$480,000 in FARC funds at the home of a retired Costa Rican university professor (Ref A). The GOC has trained Costa Rican police in courses in Colombia, as well as brought Colombian trainers to Costa Rica to conduct in-country police training. (Note: Post has also sent Costa Rican SWAT-like police officers to the USG-sponsored Jungla commando course in Colombia. End note.)

**16.** (SBU) Additionally, Colombia assisted Costa Rica with disaster assistance following the January 2009 earthquake, when the GOC sent a helicopter team (flying a UH-60 Blackhawk with a US military-trained crew) to Costa Rica to assist with rescue operations. As a result of an Arias request to Uribe, in May of 2009 the GOC also brought in a team of seven high-level Colombian disaster relief experts to consult with their Costa Rican counterparts on disaster preparedness.

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ECONOMIC LINKS, BUT NO FTA ON HORIZON  
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**17.** (U) Costa Rica and Colombia have a robust economic relationship, which has shown enormous growth over the past ten years as trade between the two countries has increased by nearly 350 percent. Trade products include fuel (bunker to Colombia; petroleum to Costa Rica), textiles, medical supplies, and insecticides. However, there exists a wide trade deficit between the two partners, as Costa Rica's imports (\$471 million in 2008) dwarf its exports (\$68 million in 2008) to Colombia.

**18.** (SBU) To address this trade imbalance, the GOCR is currently conducting an analysis of its trade relationship with Colombia to identify potential markets for Costa Rican businesses. While there has long been discussion of a potential free trade agreement (FTA) between the two countries, Costa Rican MFA Chief of Staff Elaine White recently told us that the idea was currently a non-starter. She said that while the Colombian business community was strongly in favor of an FTA, the Costa Rican private sector was dead-set against an agreement because of significant overlaps in the two countries' major products.

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REFUGEES  
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**19.** (SBU) Between 1998 and 2000 the GOCR granted over 10,000 Colombians refugee status with little scrutiny. The UNHCR and International Organization on Migration were seldom

involved in this process, except for rare cases when Colombian refugees in Costa Rica requested resettlement in a third country. While this flood has lessened and Costa Rican procedures have improved, Colombians still top the list of those granted refugee status each year. Refugees currently account for approximately one-third of all Colombians (est. 30,000) in Costa Rica.

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**TICOS WARY OF COLOMBIANOS**

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**¶10.** (SBU) While political/economic links might be strong, average Costa Ricans often blame Colombians for the relatively recent rise in crime and drug use in the country. In a recent public opinion poll on attitudes towards minority groups, 34 percent of those polled named Colombians as the group they most "distrusted", almost double the next highest group (Nicaraguans) and well ahead of all other groups (such as "other foreigners", Muslims or homosexuals). Colombian Ambassador Fernandez says he believes there is significant discrimination against Colombians due to some "bad elements" that have come to Costa Rica and received major media attention. Additionally, Fernandez believes there is some jealousy towards Colombians, who are generally very enterprising and have had good success in business ventures in Costa Rica.

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**COMMENT: A STRONG PARTNERSHIP**

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**¶11.** (SBU) Though Costa Rica has traditionally had a strong relationship with Colombia, this partnership has become more important with the disappearance of other allies in the hemisphere. Beyond Panama, Costa Rica sees Colombia as its strongest political and economic partner in the region. And while Costa Rica might not be ready to formalize a comprehensive relationship with Colombia just yet, we expect the political partnership between the two countries to continue to deepen in the coming years.

BRENNAN